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HERODOTUS AND THE ORACLE AT DELPHI

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About the middle of the fifth century at Athens, Sophocles and Herodotus—the dramatist who best exemplified the spirit of the Athenian people and the *raconteur* who is said to have been honored by a gift of ten talents from these same Athenians—glorified in their writings the oracle at Delphi. The *Oedipus Tyrannus* might almost be termed a “miracle play” in honor of the Delphic Apollo. The stories of Croesus, of Cypselus, of Battus in Herodotus, his account of Sparta and Athens, his treatment of the Persian war, all are tinged more or less with a Delphic coloring. One is tempted to ask whether the oracle had fallen into disrepute through its temporizing policy toward Persia, whether the attitude of these the most popular writers of the age was the result of a conscious effort on the part of the Delphians to win fresh credence for the ancient seat of divination. It is possible, just possible, that here as at other points Sophocles was influenced by one with whom he must have been somewhat closely associated for a time in the group of artists and authors gathered about Pericles. For Herodotus, there is every reason to believe that he was selected by the Delphic priests as the special apologist of the oracle. To review some of the evidence for this position, and to determine on this basis just what the claims of Delphi were, is the subject of the present paper.

Herodotus either quotes or summarizes more than fifty utterances of the oracle. Of the one hundred and sixty additional oracles collected by Hendess, a few are from Diodorus, Plutarch, Athenaeus; a considerable number from Pausanias; most of the remainder are quoted by Christian writers or in scholia to ancient authors, ordinarily without indication of their source. Approximately a quarter of all the extant oracles are given by Herodotus; there is reason to think that nearly half of these were given him at Delphi, either genuine oracles or oracles forged by the Delphic source in the form of genuine

oracles; many of the remainder were known to his informers from the files of oracles which were kept in cities like Athens and Sparta.¹ The oracles in Herodotus that are contaminated by non-Delphic sources seem to be very few; on the other hand, most of the oracles in later writers show the influence either of local tradition or of the chresmologic poems—the collections of oracles under the name of Bacis, Glanis, or the Sibyl—or of other non-Delphic material. In considering the second question I have proposed, the question as to the claims of Delphi, genuine oracles and oracles forged at Delphi—two groups that include nearly all the oracles mentioned by Herodotus—are alike important; both groups represent the claims of the Delphic god. In a word, the importance of the writings of Herodotus for a knowledge of Delphic claims and Delphic influence rests (1) on the fact that he is far the earliest writer who gives much material; (2) on the number of oracles he quotes; and (3) on the Delphic origin of these oracles (whether forged or genuine).

I. HERODOTUS THE SPECIAL APOLOGIST FOR THE DELPHIC ORACLE

It has long been recognized that Herodotus secured much material for his work at the Delphic shrine. An examination of the parts of his history in question proves at once his desire to do honor to Apollo; nor is it difficult to read between the lines the narrative of some Delphic priest, answering the questions of an inquisitive traveler, now furnishing the oracle that was realized in an event familiar to the visitor, or again explaining and excusing some apparent error commonly attributed to the god. For the purposes of this paper, I shall ask some of the questions Herodotus must have asked at Delphi, and point out from his history the character of the answers he received.²

1. The detailed list of costly objects dedicated at Apollo's shrine by Gyges, Halyattes, and Croesus proves the interest of Herodotus in this friendship between the god and the great kings of Lydia. The fall of Croesus was the first tragic event in the war between Persia and Greece—a tragedy that had deeply impressed our author. The traveler could but ask his Delphic guide: "Did Apollo betray his friends? Croesus, who sent these splendid monuments? Or

¹ v. 90; vi. 57.

² The method of Oeri, *De Herodoti fonte Delphico* (Basel, 1899), I believe to be correct, though I differ from some of his results in detail.

again a tyrant like Cypselus, who is said to have built the treasure house of the Corinthians? Or Battus, who was bidden to found Cyrene? Or Arcesilaus III, whom Apollo sent back to Cyrene with promises of success?" The proof that these kings were friends of Apollo lay before his eyes. How did the Delphic priesthood explain the facts?

Herodotus gives us their answer. As for Croesus, he had been distinctly warned against a battle on the Halys against a leader who was of double origin, like a mule.¹ Moreover, when he asked about his dumb son,² the Pythia had foretold disaster. When Croesus himself claimed that he had been betrayed, the priests said that Apollo had done his best for him—he had delayed, but could not altogether prevent, the fulfilment of an oracle to Gyges that in the fourth generation the race tainted by crime should meet its doom.³ As for Battus, Apollo had certainly bidden him to found Cyrene. At Delphi, however, the oracle was quoted to Herodotus in an abbreviated form without the large promises which Pindar and others had found connected with it.⁴ The god had foretold ultimate disaster to the race of Arcesilaus,⁵ and had bidden him exercise clemency. To Cypselus, and to Cleisthenes also, according to the Delphic informer of Herodotus, the god had foretold future disaster.

2. But what about the *character* of these friends of Apollo? Did the god of light favor with his friendship Gyges who secured the kingdom by crime? the enemies of Greek liberty, the tyrants Cypselus and Cleisthenes? To the traveler who asked such questions—and Herodotus would not have been the first to ask them—an answer was ready. Gyges⁶ had been confirmed in the kingdom; it had been necessary to end dissension among the Lydians; yet the god had foretold disaster to his race in the end. Over against the claim of Cypselus⁷ to Apollo's favor was set an oracle warning the Corinthians of their danger; to the oracle⁸ promising him prosperity, the Delphians added a third verse proclaiming disaster to his race. Cleisthenes⁹ had been called *λευστῆρα* ("a cruel oppressor who stoned the citizens"?) when he consulted the oracle about the hero Adrastus.

¹ i. 55.³ i. 91; i. 13.⁵ iv. 163.⁷ v. 92β.⁹ v. 67.² i. 85.⁴ iv. 155.⁶ i. 13.⁸ v. 92ε.

These two questions were answered to the satisfaction of Herodotus. In his history he defended Apollo against the charge that he betrayed his friends, and against the charge that the god had befriended the enemies of Greece. Although he freely incorporated material from other sources, it is comparatively easy for the student to detect just what story was told at Delphi to him and to any traveler who asked questions that might have proved embarrassing.

3. It seems that when Herodotus went to Delphi he was already familiar with the history of Athens and Sparta. With reference to several points he presents a double tradition, the local account which charged the Delphic oracle with failure to predict the truth, and an account, apparently of Delphic origin, which explained, refuted, or denied these charges. Either Herodotus brought these questions to Delphi, we may fairly assume, and furnishes us the answers he received, or possibly the priests recognized in him a valuable apologist, and gave him both the criticism and the answer to it with the intention that he defend the god on charges they knew were being brought against him.

For example: Sparta, having conquered Messene, desired to press northward into Arcadia. An oracle promised them Tegea¹ "to dance in, and measure off with a rope." In the period of Athenian supremacy, about the middle of the fifth century, such an oracle might well have roused the anger of the Athenians, who were interested in holding the Spartans in check. Possibly² the first verses were forged at Delphi to prove that Apollo had not incited the war, but had modified a demand of Sparta for all Arcadia. The lines about Tegea, as the priests would point out to Herodotus, had a double meaning; they were fulfilled when Spartan captives in chain gangs were forced to cultivate the fields of Tegea. The second oracle,³ about the bones of Orestes, bears no mark of Delphic modification; it may well have been genuine whether Herodotus got it at Delphi or at Sparta.

Herodotus mentions two cases in which the oracle at Delphi was reputed to have been bribed by money. According to a story⁴ he heard at Athens (from the opponents of Pericles), the Alcmaeonidae

¹ i. 66.

² Cp. Oeri, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

³ i. 67.

⁴ v. 63.

bribed the Pythia to send Spartans against the Pisistratidae in Athens. The Spartans, contrary to their own interest, did drive out the Pisistratidae, and the Alcmaeonidae again became the controlling factor in a democratic state. The cautious way in which Herodotus tells the story, and the doubt he expressed later,¹ "If they really did persuade the Pythia, etc.," suggest that Herodotus discussed the tale with his Delphic guides, who denied its truth.

On another occasion the oracle was bribed by Cleomenes to answer that Demaratus was not the son of Ariston.² Herodotus adds that, when it was discovered, Cobon, the tool of Cleomenes, was banished, and Perialle, the priestess, deposed from her office. At the same time Herodotus indicates his belief that the Pythia told the truth. We may assume that in this instance the Delphic attendants admitted the bribery of the oracle, furnished Herodotus with the names of the officials who had been punished for it, and yet claimed that the response of the Pythia had been a true one.

4. The most important question that could be raised with reference to the honor of the Delphic god has to do with his attitude in the Persian wars. It is perfectly clear that in this part of his work Herodotus is *not* the apologist for the Delphic oracle. His account³ of the god's command to invoke the winds, and of the Persian attack on Delphi is clearly of Delphic origin; but when he comes to the oracle to which Mardonius pinned his faith, the oracle that the Persian army would be destroyed if they attacked Delphi, he is forced to turn to the collection of Bacis and to insert an oracle which, he says, did not really apply to the Persians. In the first six books he appears as the apologist of the oracle on the basis of material furnished him by the priests—material much of which seems to have been forged at Delphi with the express purpose of defending the oracle from criticism. In the last three books he mentions without comment oracles which clearly show the "Medism" of Delphi; only twice does he give material gained at Delphi, and this is not at all controversial in character; in one definite instance he is driven to seek in the compilation of Bacis an oracle favorable to the claims of the shrine. Did Herodotus feel that the Delphic oracle was discredited

¹ vi. 123.

² vi. 66.

³ vii. 178; viii. 35-39.

by its attitude toward Persia? Or were these books written after he had gone from Athens to Thurii?

That the Delphic shrine looked forward to the success of Xerxes, and gave oracles on this basis, seems clear. The Cretans¹ were bidden to refrain from the war; the Argives²—if this oracle belongs where it is placed by the historian—received advice of similar import; the Athenians³ were told that Athens would be destroyed; the Spartans⁴, somewhat later, were bidden to demand reparation for the death of Leonidas and to *accept whatever Xerxes offered*. The statement⁵ that either Sparta or a Spartan king must perish was shrewd enough; it was not encouraging. That Gelon⁶ should select Delphi as a place for deposit of moneys to be given to Xerxes in case of his success, casts a shade of doubt on the oracle. That Apollo must demand from Aegina⁷ the prize for bravery at Salamis looks as if the Aeginetans did not feel deeply indebted to him for his aid. On the other hand, the allies⁸ did dedicate offerings at Delphi as well as at Olympia; at Delphi and at Athens⁹ there were monuments to the winds, whose aid Apollo had bidden the Greeks invoke.

The account of the Persian attack on Delphi¹⁰ is just what one would expect in case the Delphic shrine wished to prove that it had not favored the Persians. Today, as in the days of Herodotus, one may see the rocks that fell and crushed the Persians; the evidence is worth as much today as it was when the Delphic priests told Herodotus their tale. It is true that the attitude of the shrine had been so guarded that Xerxes may not have fully understood it; it is true that he knew of the riches gathered there, nor was he overcareful not to commit sacrilege; it is possible that the oracle trusted by Mardonius, "Pillage Delphi and be destroyed," may have been given after the retreat of Xerxes, as Busolt suggests.¹¹ On the whole, modern writers are inclined to adopt the principle of Ephorus, though they use it somewhat differently, and rationalize the tale. In any case, it is clear that Herodotus got his story at Delphi. According to the version of the priests, Apollo defended his shrine by supernatural means when the Persians attacked it, thereby proving that he was

¹ vii. 169. ³ vii. 140. ⁵ vii. 220. ⁷ viii. 122. ⁹ vii. 178, 189.

² vii. 148. ⁴ viii. 114. ⁶ vii. 163. ⁸ ix. 81. ¹⁰ viii. 35-39.

¹¹ Busolt *Griechische Geschichte* II². 689, A. 3, quoted with approval by Hauvette.

the all-powerful friend of Greece. The usefulness of this proof (which was certainly necessary) and the appeal to the fallen rocks arouse suspicion.

The fact remains that, but for this story of the rocks and the reference to a Delphic altar to the winds, the Delphic source does not appear in the last three books of the history. There are no cases of the revision of tales from local sources in the light of material found at Delphi.

It has often been pointed out that almost all the oracles which Herodotus got at Delphi are quoted in their metrical form, while oracles from other sources are frequently given only in substance. That the Delphic "Commentaries" were in written form, a book of oracles (forged and genuine) together with notes and explanations to prove the power of the Delphic Apollo, is a just inference.

It remains to be proven that anyone besides Herodotus has drawn largely from this source. I am inclined to agree with Oeri¹ that Herodotus was selected by the Delphic priests as their special apologist, and that special pains were taken to furnish him with the Delphic version of Greek history. I should go farther than Oeri in saying that Herodotus had too much historical sense to fulfil the task laid upon him. In his earlier books the non-Delphic version of Delphic tales can often be made out clearly. Where the Delphic shrine most needed defense, in explaining its attitude during the Persian wars, Herodotus failed the priests entirely. The reason for this is most easily found in the assumption that when he wrote these books he had already left Greece and was no longer under the influence of the Delphic priesthood.

II. THE CLAIMS OF THE DELPHIC ORACLE

The second question I have proposed has to do with the claims of the Delphic oracle. Granted that Herodotus is the one special apologist of this shrine, so far as Greek literature is preserved to us, and that he has been instructed by the priests in their doctrine of Apollo as an infallible prophet, inspired guide in politics, morals, and religion, we could find no better means for determining the claims of Delphi than by the study of this history. Nor is it necessary for such a study

¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 67 f.

to distinguish forged deliverances of the god from those that are genuine. In many instances the forgeries can be detected, but both classes alike illustrate the *claims* of the shrine; only when we wish to weigh these claims is it necessary to throw out forgeries and forged emendations.

In general, the Delphic shrine claimed that the priestess gave inspired responses to questions about what was beyond the range of human knowledge. These responses, to judge from the samples preserved by Herodotus, did not always answer the questions that were asked, for sometimes the god furnished information more important than that which the questioner asked; they were often in the form of riddles, though the priests claimed that these riddles should be clear enough to intelligent men; many of them were perfectly definite, enforcing a few principles, which will presently be stated. From other sources one learns something of the method by which the oracle was consulted, the character of the priestess, the way the question was put, the part of the priests in giving the answer metrical form, etc. That all such things are omitted without comment by Herodotus, that he uses the simple formula, "The Pythia answered," might lead to the inference that he knew little or nothing of the paraphernalia of the shrine. I believe this inference to be substantially true, not because he was not interested to investigate the matter, but rather because the priests sought to conceal it. Whatever the explanation, he invariably gives the claim of the shrine in its simplest form. The god knows what man does not know; he answers directly through the priestess questions about this unknown; on this imposing claim rested the dignity and influence of the shrine.

If, now, we go further, and ask just what sort of answers about the future were given, and what general principles guided these answers, the oracles quoted to Herodotus give much information.

1. The Delphic oracle claimed to guide *individuals* who sought its aid. That the oracles of Herodotus were given to public men, prophets and kings, is to be explained by the nature of his work. Halyattes sent to Delphi about his illness; Croesus, about his son's deafness; Tisamenes came to inquire about offspring. The last receives a promise of glory in great contests; Croesus is warned of evil; Halyattes alone gets what he came for—the knowledge that by

rebuilding a temple of Athena the divine cause of his illness would be removed.

2. The Delphic oracle claimed to meet difficulties in the internal administration of Greek states. It confirmed and overthrew dynasties, as in Lydia and Cyrene. In general, the deliverances of the oracle confirmed the party in power, while it foretold the final overthrow of dynasties which gained the power by unjust means. In Lydia the Heracleidae, then the overthrower of the Heracleidae, were confirmed in their power, while to the race of Gyges the limit was set at four generations. So at Cyrene there were to be four kings of the name of Battus, four of the name of Arcesilaus.

Further, the Delphic oracle claimed the power to put an end to political confusion. It claimed to have given the constitution of Sparta to Lycurgus, to decide on the legitimacy of Spartan kings; it sent an arbitrator from Mantinea to Cyrene; it promised the Dolonci a deliverer, who turned out to be Miltiades.

In particular, states turned to Delphi for aid in the time of a plague. In such instances the oracle first stated the cause of the plague, then the remedy. Trees died of drought at Thera¹ because no colony in Libya had been founded, as Apollo had bidden; when Battus set out for Libya, the plague ceased. At Epidaurus² the unfruitfulness of plants and animals was due to failure to worship the divinities of growth; the people were bidden to worship Damia and Auxesia.³ At Lemnos⁴ a similar plague was due to the cruelty of the people toward their Athenian wives; recompense must be made to the Athenians. Delphi⁵ itself suffered from a plague as a result of the cruel murder of Aesop; the plague ceased when it paid a sum of money to the injured family. The blindness of the Cnidians,⁶ who attempted to make their peninsula an island, was explained as due to this interference with the laws of nature. These plagues were explained as caused by transgression of moral law, or by neglect of some divinity; in almost every instance the appeal to the oracle was used to confirm Delphi in its claim to be the moral and religious guide of Greece.

3. The Delphic god guides the colonies founded by Greek states. Herodotus mentions the oracles in regard to only three attempts at

¹ iv. 150 f.

² v. 82.

³ i Cf. i. 167.

⁴ vi. 139.

⁵ ii. 134.

⁶ i. 174.

colonization; these, however, illustrate the claims of the god. The Spartans¹ under Dorieus founded a colony, we are told, "without consulting Delphi as to the place, or performing any of the customary rites." Driven out from Libya, and returning unsuccessful, they did consult the Delphic god, whereupon their venture in Sybaris was crowned with his blessing. It appeared that Delphi had gained the *right* to be consulted about colonies. Herodotus quotes several oracles, and mentions several more, in his account of Cyrene. In this instance it appears that the original idea that the Theraeans found a colony in Libya² was suggested to their king when he consulted the oracle about other matters. When a plague had warned them of the displeasure of Apollo, if we may accept the Delphic interpretation, and when yet other evils drove them to consult the god, the answer³ was still: "Found a colony in Libya." Twice the colonists who had obeyed the god sought to return; Apollo did not permit them, but instead urged all the Greeks who came to Delphi to join the colony at Cyrene. Apollo, we may infer, claimed the right to dictate to a state that it send out a colony, the right to say where the colony should be founded, and the right to supervise the affairs of the nascent state. In no other sphere of its activity does the political shrewdness of the priests appear to better advantage.

4. The Delphic oracle claimed to guide the Greek states in war. Inasmuch as both parties were likely to consult the oracle, and the issue of the war was often uncertain, the task of answering the questions put to the oracle in such wise as to maintain the influence of the shrine as arbiter of Greece, must have been an extremely delicate one. The priests of the Delphic god seem to have made three claims to Herodotus: (1) the god warns those who seek his advice of impending calamity; (2) the god checks arrogant plans by advising moderation and delay; (3) the god sometimes suggests a divinity or hero by whose worship victory may be obtained. The Athenians were bidden, said the priests, to wait thirty years before attacking Aegina, and meanwhile to establish the worship of Aeacus; after both conditions were fulfilled, the victory of Athens was complete. The victory of the Greeks at Artemisium was claimed by the oracle to be the result of its advice to worship the winds. Naturally the

¹ v. 42.² iv. 150.³ iv. 156.

priests laid even more stress on the first point, the warning of impending calamity. Croesus, they said, had been warned to flee when a mule became king of the Persians; Siphnus had not heeded the warning against the red herald; the fall of Miletus was foreseen and foretold by the god. With reference to the expedition of Xerxes I have tried to show that Herodotus does not give us the standpoint of Delphi with the same definiteness as elsewhere. No doubt it was politic for the oracle to advise Argos and Crete not to join the war, to predict the fall of Athens, to answer the Spartans that their city or one of its kings should fall. How the priests would have explained the so-called "Medism" of the oracle we do not know.

5. It has already appeared that the oracle claimed to be a guide in Greek worship, especially the worship of heroes. In general, its influence was exerted to establish or to resuscitate the worship of purely local divinities. The worship of the winds at Delphi and of Boreas at Athens might be classed as local. Orestes' bones were brought to Sparta, Cynus was worshiped at Velia, rites to heroes were established at Agylla, Aeacus obtained a shrine at Athens—all as the result of oracles delivered by the Delphic Apollo. In general, these local worships meant more for popular religion than the more imposing state worship; it is not so much that Apollo turned against the worship of the greater gods, as that he sought to develop a more vital religion among the people.

In two instances the Delphic god speaks in favor of the servants of local religion. A priestess at Paros,¹ Timo by name, was charged with complicity in the attack of Miltiades; when the matter was referred to Delphi, the god bade the Parians to release her, asserting that Miltiades, the real offender, would be punished. Again the god commanded reparation to one Euenius² who had been punished too severely for alleged neglect of duty in his sacred office.

6. Finally, to judge from the oracles quoted by Herodotus, the Delphic shrine claimed to be a moral guide to the Greeks. The punishment of sin is a favorite theme in Herodotus; in the oracles themselves, moreover, not simply in his comments, the principle is frequently enunciated that sin is punished in the end. To Cypselus,

¹ vi. 135.

² ix. 93.

to Gyges, to the Battiadae, are given assurances of temporary prosperity and final overthrow. One of the most interesting cases is that of Glaucus,¹ the Spartan who dared ask the oracle whether he might keep money which he had sworn to pay. No doubt the oracle was forged after the extermination of his family, but—probably under Delphic influence—the fact was made the text for an oracle in which this dire punishment was predicted. The man who *purposed* to break his oath—such was the sentiment attributed to the Pythia—was to be punished as severely as though he had carried out his purpose; though the punishment was delayed, it was none the less sure.

In one other point the oracles cited by Herodotus bear testimony to this ethical influence. Again and again these deliverances demand a recompense for cruelty and murder; not the recompense in kind which led to blood-feuds among primitive peoples, but rather a fine in money. Ordinarily some plague sends the offending party to Delphi for aid. The Lemnians who slew their conspiring wives are bidden to pay what recompense their Athenian kindred demand; the Delphians themselves are to make money recompense to the relatives of Aesop for his cruel death; apparently it is a money recompense which the Spartans were to demand for the death of Leonidas. Only in the case of the Agyllaeans did religious rites atone for cruel deeds. That cruelty and murder were to be punished even when they were the acts of the state; that this punishment was to be of such a character as not to provoke further deeds of violence—such was the principle inculcated by the answers of the oracle.

The lesson of Herodotus consists in these imposing claims of the oracle. To estimate the importance of these claims, to offer any explanation for the truth that lies behind them, to investigate the ritual by which oracles were given, are tasks which I have intentionally set aside in order to study Herodotus' testimony in itself.

¹ vi. 86.